

Senate Statistics

Sergeants at Arms

Forest A. Harness (1953-1955)



In 1798, when the Senate needed an officer to pursue and arrest an expelled former senator, it expanded its doorkeeper's duties with the title "sergeant at arms." This first sergeant at arms chased the fleeing senator home to Tennessee, but failed to persuade him to return to the capital for an impeachment trial. More than 130 years later, special prosecutor [Forest A. Harness](#) had a similar, but more successful experience. In 1934, nineteen years before he became the Senate's twenty-second sergeant at arms, Harness traveled on government orders to Athens, Greece, to return a fugitive corporation executive to the United States for trial. Perhaps it was this experience, along with his solid Republican credentials, that helped him nab the job of Senate sergeant at arms in January 1953.

Forest Arthur Harness was born in Kokomo, Indiana, on June 24, 1895. Raised on a farm that had been in his family since the earliest days of that region's settlement, he attended the Kokomo public schools. His formal education continued at Georgetown University Law School. He obtained his law degree in the spring of 1917, just as the United States entered World War I. Faced with major career-shaping decisions, he enlisted in the army, entered an officers' training program at Fort Myer, Virginia, and got married. When he completed the training program, the army sent him to join the 319th Infantry in France, where he gained the rank of first lieutenant. In the course of his military service, he suffered combat wounds and was awarded the Purple Heart.

After the war, Harness returned to Kokomo. He entered his uncle's law practice, became active in local Republican political circles, and served from 1920 to 1925 as his county's prosecuting attorney.

Like other veterans of the so-called Great War, Harness enthusiastically joined the newly created American Legion. He became commander of the Legion's Kokomo post and took full advantage of that office's opportunities to build an active political network. He expanded the Legion's membership and helped to purchase and develop the Kokomo

American Legion Golf Course. In 1929, he became the American Legion's Indiana state commander.

Two years later, Harness accepted a position as special assistant to the attorney general of the United States. In his most visible and significant case, he conducted a Chicago grand jury investigation of public utilities magnate Samuel Insull, who was a protege of Thomas Edison and a founder of the General Electric Company. By 1931, successive stock market crashes had shattered Insull's corporate empire and had drained away the life savings of his companies' many small investors. As Insull resigned from top positions in sixty public utilities corporations, he quickly became a national scapegoat—a symbol of the fraud and corruption that had contributed to the Great Depression.

Insull fled to Europe in 1932 and settled in Athens. By October, thirty-seven-year-old Forest Harness—then considered the ablest special prosecutor in the Chicago region—won an indictment of Insull on charges of embezzlement. Additional indictments soon followed on mail fraud and bankruptcy law violations. The Justice Department sent Harness to Athens to arrange for Insull's extradition to stand trial in Chicago. After returning, Harness spent the next two years as part of a Justice Department team that prepared for Insull's three trials. Those trials ran from late 1934 to early 1935 and became major media events. Elderly, ill, and well-defended, Insull won acquittal on all charges. Despite his acquittals, Insull's trial focused national attention on the dangers of private control of the public utilities industry and prompted major New Deal-era reforms.

On July 1, 1935, his trial work completed, Harness resigned from the Justice Department to resume his private law practice. Back in Kokomo, he also turned his attention to strengthening his ties with area Republicans. Early in 1938, he launched a campaign for Indiana's Fifth District seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. As it turned out, Harness had picked a good year to run. A midterm nationwide reaction to the policies of President Franklin Roosevelt contributed to the loss of seventy-one Democratic House seats, including six within the Indiana delegation. Harness easily defeated his district's Democratic incumbent. In the years ahead, he coasted to reelection for another four terms.

During his ten years in the House, Harness chaired a special committee to investigate the licensing policies of the Federal Communications Commission and served on the Military Affairs Committee, the Rules Committee, and the Republican Policy Committee. As 1938 had proved to be a good year for Republican challengers seeking House seats, 1948 turned out to be a disaster for many of those same Republicans. That political calamity extended to Harness and four of his eight Indiana G.O.P. colleagues. At the conclusion of his fifth House term on January 3, 1949, Harness returned to private practice in Kokomo. In 1952, as Republicans realized they had a good chance of regaining control of both houses of Congress and the White House, Indiana party leaders enlisted Harness as assistant state party chairman with direct responsibility for aiding the G.O.P.'s congressional candidates. Before the election, the state's congressional delegation included nine Republicans and two Democrats. After the election, the numbers

stood at ten Republicans and one very popular Democrat. Harness had succeeded in his assignment.

When the Republicans organized the Senate in January 1953, Indiana's two Republican senators rewarded Harness's party service by sponsoring him to replace Sergeant at Arms [Joseph C. Duke](#). In a contested election, the Republican Conference selected Harness by a vote of 32 to 14; the full Senate made it official on January 3, 1953.

When Harness took his Senate oath on that day, the body consisted of forty-eight Republicans, forty-seven Democrats, and one Independent. During that Congress, nine senators died in office. (No previous sergeant at arms had ever been taxed with a greater responsibility for making funeral arrangements.) Several of the deceased were replaced by members of the other party—a situation that created enormous instability with shifting party totals leaving the "majority" party at times with a minority of members."

Forest Harness served as sergeant at arms for just two years. In January 1955, when the Democrats took back the Senate majority by a margin as slim as that under the Republicans, they ousted Harness to bring back Joseph Duke. As a reward for his long and effective service to the nation and to the Republican party, President Dwight Eisenhower appointed Harness to a term on the American Battle Monuments Commission. He held that post until 1960, when he retired and moved to Sarasota, Florida. Harness died in Florida on July 29, 1974.